

Prayers

Opening prayer

Jesus; great and wonderful Lord, calm my spirit this day I pray. I place my hope in You because You know my future, and You are always there to guide me along the path I tread. Stay close, Lord Jesus, not because I ask it, but because You have promised to be with me; my Guide, my Counsellor and my Friend. Thank You. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: The Future

1. For yourself

Ask the Lord to help you perceive the future He has for you and not just the future you can see

2. For your friends and family

Pray that God will bless your friends and family with the love, friendship and companionship, which marks out those who love the Lord. Pray especially for those who do not own His love

3. For the church and its work

Pray that the church will catch a vision of all that God would have it do in the future. Pray that the church will be God's servant in the world, and show Him to all in word and deed.

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for the future of the world, especially now, remembering the damage done to the environment by the pollution of its air, its land and its seas.

Meditation

Gracious Lord God, You have lifted us up:

We needed Your help
And You responded immediately.

Lord Jesus Christ, You have held us close:

We needed Your touch,
And You came with healing power.

Holy Spirit, You have breathed into us new life:

We needed Your renewal
And You showed the power of Your care.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, You have loved us:

Before we even knew our need,
You were ready to help us in any way You could.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Matthew 8:23-27

²³ Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. ²⁴ Suddenly, a violent storm broke out on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by waves; but he was asleep. ²⁵ They went to him and woke him up, saying,

‘Lord, save us! We are going to drown!’

²⁶ Then he said to them,

‘Why are you so terrified, you of little faith?’

Then he got up and scolded the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. ²⁷ They were amazed, and said,

‘What sort of man is this? Even the winds and the sea obey him!’

Review

Matthew continues to tell us amazing stories of Jesus’ ministry; and this time, our reading is not a miracle of healing but a miracle of nature. This demonstration of God’s power is quite clearly intended as a sign to the disciples and to us. Now the story of Jesus calming the storm is one of the great word pictures of the New Testament, and it demonstrates Jesus’ authority and nature as God’s Messiah. Over the years, however, many sceptics have attempted to diminish the meaning of this story, questioning whether Jesus either could or would wish to perform a mere ‘nature’ miracle that seems to smack of God’s personal preferences.

It may be easy to pick holes in a story such as this, with many levels of meaning, but the simple plain story, as a description of a miracle, still has a great deal to teach us. At least, it speaks of a God who is in control of all the forces of nature, at a time when many people feel threatened by the natural world around them. What is God saying to His people today and indeed to the whole world, when the way we live on this planet appears to be stifling its ability to sustain life? What indeed will happen to our world if it becomes engulfed in ecological disaster?

In the early ministry of Jesus, people constantly asked ‘who is this man?’ or ‘how can He teach with such authority?’ (see 7:29). Right from the beginning, Jesus did not hold back from giving very strong hints about who He was and the nature of His ministry. As He began to preach He talked about the Kingdom of God with authority (4:17), and in the Sermon on the Mount, He talked about His own personal involvement in God’s Kingdom (5:11,17 etc) as if what belonged to God belonged to Him. This made people ask a great many questions about Him, and now, through the means of healings and miracles, Jesus gave an answer to these questions by deeds rather than words. All of this may well have been true to the real sequence of events in Jesus’ life, for it would only gradually have dawned on people that Jesus was the true Messiah in their midst, doing the works of God. They would have had to make up their own minds about Him by observing what He did as well as hearing His words, and we all know that despite the evidence before us, it sometimes takes a long time for us to interpret the full impact of dramatic events which happen around us.

For many years, probably ever since this story about Jesus stilling the storm on the lake was first told by Jesus’ disciples, there have been three ways of looking at the story:

1. As an example of Jesus’ authority which points to who He is.
2. A story about the faith and discipleship of Jesus’ followers.
3. An allegory of the life of the church, and an example of trust in Jesus Christ amidst life’s storms.

Of course, all these three are important, but each approach illuminates the others. It is particularly important not to get too carried away with the third without first paying close attention to what the story really says about Jesus and the disciples.

I suggest that the first of these is the main reason for the story. At this early stage of Jesus’ ministry, it was essential that Jesus drew people in so that they began to ask serious questions about who He really was. Jesus wanted people to make up their minds about Him from the evidence they saw before them, and not because he made claims about who He was. History is littered with the written statements of kings and scholars who have attempted to leave their mark by telling other people what to think of them. But Jesus’ method of impacting on the history of the world was to speak God’s words and do His deeds, and let people make up their own minds. It is an approach we would do well to copy in our witness to the faith today.

Going Deeper

This story is somewhat complicated, and it will help us if we begin our further study by looking carefully at a number of background issues, before focussing on the meaning of what it says. There are a number of unexpected features to the story. For example, who were the disciples in the boat? In the end, however, we will come back to a deeper understanding of Jesus’ authority.

Some background

As with so many stories of the New Testament, we can get to grips with this one best if we bear in mind a few background details.

We will start with the disciples. It does not say who was in the boat, but we would assume at least Peter, Andrew, James and John; who were the only disciples identified in the Gospel at this point. In a few verses we will read of the call of the tax collector Matthew (our author?) from his collecting booth, so this would appear not to be a story told from firsthand experience! In just over one chapter's time we will be introduced to the twelve disciples at the beginning of their first mission, but at this point, they are already a formed group. Therefore, we have no way of knowing who else was 'following' Jesus as His disciples (8:23) at this time and may have been present. The ones who were definitely there, however, were all experienced fishermen, and were used to the Lake of Galilee, to boats, fish and all the features of life by the Sea of Galilee, including its notorious storms!

Going back a little into the Old Testament, it is worth looking at the well-known first chapter of Jonah. The story of Jonah contains these elements, which are remarkably similar to our reading today:

- Departure by boat
- A violent Storm
- The main character sleeping during the storm
- Frightened men panicking about what to do
- A miraculous stilling of the storm – focussed on the main character
- A marvellous response, including (in Jonah) worship of God.

Jesus himself referred to Jonah several times in his ministry, so it does appear that He saw great significance in this Old Testament prophetic story. Twice, after He had already performed a miracle, people came up to Him and asked Him for another sign, and He told them that they would have no sign except for that of the 'prophet Jonah' (12:38ff and 16:4ff). On one of these occasions, He also said 'something greater than Jonah is here' (12:41), to make it very clear that He was more than a 'prophet' working miracles.

If we look carefully at both the story of Jonah and our text today, then Jesus takes the place of both the prophet Jonah and God. Jonah went to sleep in the boat, just as Jesus did, and whereas Jonah needed salvation, Jesus delivered salvation from the situation. We cannot draw the parallel too far, as Jesus is not thrown into the sea as Jonah was; but the implication of Jesus' later sayings in chapter 12 (see above) are that the whole incident is prophetic. Jesus would spend three days and nights 'in the ground' just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale for this period of time before being released by the fish. Jesus' references to Jonah are part of the way He prepared His disciples for his ultimate goal, the Cross and His resurrection; and this story today prepares the way for them to see Jesus in that light.

Finally, there is much in the Old Testament about God's authority over 'the waters', beginning in the Creation narratives (Gen 1:2). However, it is also demonstrated in other texts 'You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves ...' (Psalm 65:7, see also Ps 29:3); and in Isaiah, God is seen as rescuing His people as through water, just as He brought them through the Red Sea with Moses; 'awake, awake, put on strength ... was it not You who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep ... for the ransomed of the Lord to pass over?' (Isaiah 51:9-11). The connection of Christian Faith with water became even stronger in later years with the command from our Lord to 'baptise'.

These are pictures of God at work, and were part and parcel of the faith of people in Jesus' day. They would have seen the connections between Jesus the man they saw before them, and what they understood of the power and the authority of God.

What happened?

After the demanding time Jesus had whilst preaching the Sermon on the Mount, His words generated an immediate heightened interest in what He said and did. There was an immediate response; several healings, and a challenge by a couple of would be disciples. Jesus was now tired, and our story today indicates that he fell asleep in a boat crossing the Lake of Galilee, together with at least four of his closer disciples, Peter, Andrew, James and John. After the previous conversations about discipleship and 'following' (vv18-22), they are most likely to be the ones Jesus allowed to 'follow' Him (v23) at this point in time.

Violent storms were well known on the Lake of Galilee, due to the topography of the surrounding hills. The fishermen with Him must have lived through scores of storms of varying intensity. Why should they be afraid? There must have been some features of this storm which were beyond their experience, so for them, this storm was different. The text we have says that this storm was violent, using a word ('violent storm' – v24) normally used for 'earthquakes'. Matthew used this word to say that something more than the ordinary was happening and this was why the seasoned sailors were frightened. They were afraid that the boat was

taking on too much water and would sink, and that was a judgement they were well qualified to make! They were truly frightened for their lives.

Jesus (like Jonah) remained asleep whilst all this was going on. When they had awoken Jesus and impressed upon Him the urgency of their concerns for the safety of all, His response was 'why are you so terrified, you of little faith'. Jesus had used this expression once before, in the Sermon on the Mount (6:30), and both there and here it would be wrong of us to read it as if Jesus had a tone of dismissal in his voice. It was only a mild rebuke, for He knew the enormous journey of faith that the disciples were embarking on. Later in His ministry, Jesus would describe 'little faith' which was 'the size of a mustard seed' (17:20) as more than sufficient for all things. For this reason, we should not think that Jesus' words to the disciples were a form of rebuke. No, the focus was on Jesus, who stood in the midst of the storm and spoke to the wind and the waves with authority; thus picking up the theme of the response of people at the end of his preaching (7:28,29).

Some people are concerned about the whole idea of Jesus speaking to the wind and the waves, because it conveys the idea that these were personal forces, perhaps demonic, which Jesus could speak to. That could indeed be the case, but again, it is probably not the main point of the story, which is that Jesus has the authority to do whatever He wishes with Creation, and therefore reveals Himself as God. Only God had authority over the created elements (Job 38:8-11, Psalm 33:7, Proverbs 8:22-31, Jeremiah 5:22, 31:35), and in this incident, Jesus used this authority both to save his disciples and also to show them something of Himself.

The things that Jesus did the required effect; as the disciples immediately asked the important question 'what sort of man is this?' (8:27). This was a question which was only gradually answered by the disciples after they saw more of Jesus' power and authority, notably after He 'walked on water' (14:22-32) and then when Peter was challenged by Jesus at Caesarea Philippi (16:15) to declare what he believed. On both these occasions, the response given to the amazing events which took place was a clear statement from the disciple(s) concerned, affirming the divinity of Jesus as 'God's Son'.

Jesus was not bothered to brag with words; saying 'I am divine, I am God's Son'. To do so would make Him appear to be a madman. He constantly invited those around Him, principally the disciples, to make that decision for themselves, by looking at the evidence before them. He does the same for us today so that our discipleship is our choice, not God's imposition. God has acted first by sending Jesus Christ to be our Saviour, but after that, it is our choice to respond.

Discipleship

Application

It is so easy for us to see in this story an example of our own lives. I am sure that Jesus knew His actions would be reported and become the basis of faith for more people than just a few fishermen.

Most of us experience ups and downs as a matter of course in almost every area of our lives, and this fact should give us no concern. Indeed, God has given us spiritual and mental resources to stand the regular tests of life. However, there are times when extraordinary things happen which catch us off guard and throw us down, making us feel as if we are 'sinking'. This happens to individuals as well as to families and churches. These are the times when our 'little faith' (but very important) is most sorely tested, and we need the authority of the Risen Christ to enable us to be saved through the 'storms of life'. We should not think of this as a regular occurrence, but an experience of special times; and it is often in such special times that we become aware of the majesty and authority of God in ways that are very important to us.

Later on, after such experiences, we can and should tell the tale of our deliverance, as did both Jonah and the disciples. When these things are happening and we are in the boat with Jesus, there is nowhere to go, and no one else to call upon for help! When He saves us, it gives us a story to tell, and this is an important part of our witness to the faith we have in Christ Jesus.

Questions for groups

1. What lessons about faith do you see in this story?
2. Share times when you have experienced something catastrophic, within which Jesus has helped you.
3. Does this story speak to people today of Jesus as divine? What do people make of it today?

Discipleship challenges

- *You may feel that you have not experienced a major incident of faith which has shocked you to the core in the same way that this must have affected the disciples. If so, ask the Lord prayerfully to help you see Him at work around You, and find your testimony there.*
 - *If you know someone in your church who has a great testimony of faith, find time to speak to them and discover more about how this has affected their lives and the changes that have come to them as a result. Allow their testimony to speak to you.*
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Final Prayer

Jesus, Your love is amazing. Through Your Word, You help us deal with difficult situations, You encourage us when we are down, You challenge us with exciting possibilities, and You rescue us when we are in trouble. Thank You Jesus for Your love. AMEN
